

For Iranians to Rise Up, a Clear Path for Regime Defectors Is Needed

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Neither the United States nor Israel has offered the concrete incentives needed to spur high-level defections from the security, political, and clerical establishments—a crucial precondition for regime change.

As the war with the United States and Israel dragged on, pro-regime Iranians chanted “Haydar! Haydar!” as a show of strength and defiance in the streets of Tehran and other cities. The title, meaning “lion,” was bestowed on Ali, the first Shia Imam, for his bravery during the seventh-century Battle of Khaybar. These [rallies \(https://x.com/TehranTimes79/status/2041204749320741371?s=20\)](https://x.com/TehranTimes79/status/2041204749320741371?s=20), which sometimes stretched past midnight and featured Islamic Republic [flags \(https://x.com/FarsNews_Agency/status/2041190019788931485?s=20\)](https://x.com/FarsNews_Agency/status/2041190019788931485?s=20) and often guns, were as much about intimidation as nationalism, meant to keep anti-regime Iranians indoors amid growing fears they might attempt to overthrow the regime. This atmosphere was reinforced by a heavy security presence, with checkpoints and machine guns mounted on [trucks \(https://www.youtube.com/shorts/48uJJ8Tr3NE\)](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/48uJJ8Tr3NE).

In statements on the first day of the war, [President Trump \(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-trumps-full-statement-on-iran-attack\)](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-trumps-full-statement-on-iran-attack) and Israeli [Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu \(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-netanyahus-full-statement-on-iran-attacks\)](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-netanyahus-full-statement-on-iran-attacks) framed their countries’ operations as a campaign to eliminate threats from Tehran, but also mentioned regime change and called on the people to rise up. There is no doubt that most Iranians want the Islamic Republic gone, as evidenced by repeated, massive anti-regime protests over the years, including most recently in December and January, when the regime [massacred \(https://www.en-hrana.org/the-crimson-winter-a-50-day-record-of-irans-2025-2026-nationwide-protests/\)](https://www.en-hrana.org/the-crimson-winter-a-50-day-record-of-irans-2025-2026-nationwide-protests/) tens of thousands of protesters.

Notably, Trump’s February 28 [message \(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-trumps-full-statement-on-iran-attack\)](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-trumps-full-statement-on-iran-attack) also mentioned the possibility of amnesty for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), other

armed forces, and police if they lay down their weapons. He promised that those who did so would “be treated fairly with total immunity,” while those who did not would “face certain death.” However, Washington has not provided details about the path to defection, and neither the United States nor Israel has publicly offered financial rewards or a safe harbor for defectors. In fact, their comments and actions have made the war an existential struggle for the regime and many of its members and followers. Furthermore, while allied military operations have removed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and severely degraded the senior security and military leadership, they have failed to trigger high-profile defections among the clerical establishment, which would likely serve as a prerequisite for successful anti-regime protests.

The Islamic Republic saw significant defections in the past. In the early 2000s, the CIA attempted to **recruit** (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/04/06/he-helped-stop-iran-from-getting-the-bomb>) Iranian nuclear scientists as part of what was reportedly known as “Project Brain Drain,” persuading several to defect and provide enough information for the United States to construct accurate life-size versions of Iranian nuclear facilities. In 2021, an Iranian and two Canadians **were charged** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/29/us/politics/iran-us-charges-murder.html>) with attempting to kill an Iranian defector and his spouse in Maryland, though certain aspects of his background are unclear.

During the current crisis, however, only five high-level defections have been reported. Two Iranian diplomats **defected in January** (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-885472>) after the massacre of protesters: the charge d’affaires at the Iranian embassy in Austria, and a senior official at Iran’s permanent mission to the UN in Geneva. In addition, an **Interior Ministry official** (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-884010>) and **two other diplomats** (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/mar/13/former-iranian-diplomat-granted-asylum-in-australia-after-defecting-ntwnfb>) have defected during the war.

On March 31, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth **stated** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hegseth-says-he-visited-us-troops-middle-east-2026-03-31/>), “Our strikes are damaging the morale of the Iranian military, leading to widespread desertions, key personnel shortages, and causing frustrations amongst senior leaders.” Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent had offered similar **claims** (<https://x.com/Osint613/status/2034632907680018454?s=20>) earlier that month: “We’re starting to see defections...[W]e now know where the Iranian leadership bank accounts are, and those are being frozen. And we will hold them and see who comes forward in terms of defections!” President Trump likewise **noted** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3_1OVqB-qo) that there were “a lot of military defections.”

These claims are difficult to verify independently, in part because Iran’s internet has been shut down since the war began. Yet they appear to refer to low-level defectors who would more accurately be **described** (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/changing-sides-doesnt-always-make-for-transformation-just-look-at-e/>) as security and military personnel shirking their duties or deserting. Some officers reportedly **abandoned** (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202603063591>) their barracks, while others deserted their **missile** (<https://x.com/AmitSegal/status/2032365394451694063?s=20>) and Basij militia units in Tehran. In some cases, **neglect** (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202603127596>) by commanders contributed to these departures. **Delays** (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202603174700>) in payment of salaries also disrupted deployments, while anecdotal accounts suggest that some security personnel went home to be with their families. Interestingly, **reports** (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/04/iran-recruitment-of-child-soldiers-as-young-as-12-amounts-to-a-war-crime/>) have emerged of child soldiers at checkpoints and on patrols, suggesting that some adults shirked their responsibilities. Still, these kinds of **defections** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/16/briefing/your-iran-questions.html>), while noteworthy, have not been

significant enough to alter the course of the war.

As noted, defections are hard to measure—other than public defections to the West—and can take [many forms \(https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/changing-sides-doesnt-always-make-for-transformation-just-look-at-e/\)](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/changing-sides-doesnt-always-make-for-transformation-just-look-at-e/). Large-scale defections involving outright disobedience are far less likely given the Islamic Republic's tight security presence and the serious consequences of committing treason. Numerous intelligence [assessments \(https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/us-intelligence-says-iran-government-is-not-risk-collapse-say-sources-2026-03-11/\)](https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/us-intelligence-says-iran-government-is-not-risk-collapse-say-sources-2026-03-11/) suggest that the Islamic Republic will survive this war, so the incentive to defect is reduced—though discreet disobedience is still possible. Some argue that after military hostilities subside, renewed protests might once again pose a challenge to the regime, akin to what happened in Iraq after it lost the 1991 Gulf War. There too, a weakened regime was still capable enough to carry out mass killings of protesters, and no outside actors stopped it. Yet senior Iranian officials nevertheless appear [concerned \(https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/iran-eastern-states/artc-iran-s-supreme-national-security-council-meets-over-fears-of-renewed-protests-amid-economic-crisis-report\)](https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/iran-eastern-states/artc-iran-s-supreme-national-security-council-meets-over-fears-of-renewed-protests-amid-economic-crisis-report) about the prospect of renewed protests.

What would signal the erosion of the Islamic Republic is top-level defections by the political elite, which have not yet materialized, largely due to ideological commitment and deep loyalty. Unlike the shah's personalist regime, which quickly unraveled once he left the country, the Islamic Republic is heavily institutionalized and has "eaten many of its children" while consolidating power over the decades. Its architecture has evolved since 1979, in part due to the expanded influence of the IRGC, which turned Iran into a centralized security state. And thanks to the June 2025 war, that security state now has [four layers \(https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/22/world/middleeast/iran-larjani-khamenei-pezeskian.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/22/world/middleeast/iran-larjani-khamenei-pezeskian.html) of active and retired senior officers who can fill open slots to withstand decapitation measures.

Having drawn lessons from the shah's downfall, the system learned to [anticipate \(https://www.meforum.org/mef-online/why-the-iranian-regime-endures\)](https://www.meforum.org/mef-online/why-the-iranian-regime-endures) internal and external pressures, including mass protests and wars. Moreover, unlike members of the shah's inner circle, many within the upper echelons of the clerical establishment lack exit options, reinforcing the need to double down, as evident in the bloody [response \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-islamic-republic-learned-about-repression-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-islamic-republic-learned-about-repression-syria) to the January uprising.

While the Islamic Republic was always a hard nut to crack, the United States has not spent much time thinking about how to crack it—a failure that has become clear from Washington's improvisational approach to setting goals for this war. Historical comparisons can still offer some guidance, however. When [protests erupt \(https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/exit-resistance-loyalty-military-behavior-during-unrest-in-authoritarian-regimes/20164E4AD6AE05B35C0AFEC027507148\)](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/exit-resistance-loyalty-military-behavior-during-unrest-in-authoritarian-regimes/20164E4AD6AE05B35C0AFEC027507148) in a country with an authoritarian regime, military members can stage a coup, defect abroad, refuse to implement orders, or remain loyal to the regime.

In Egypt, after a popular uprising ousted Hosni Mubarak's regime in 2011, the army rode popular sentiment and briefly took over via a military junta. In 2013, due to its entrenched control over the country and the economy, it took part in a popular coup, removing President Mohamed Morsi.

In Syria's civil war, defections occurred early, and some of those defecting formed the force that became the rebel Free Syrian Army. Nevertheless, those defections were not enough to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime given its alliances with Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah, and the defectors got caught up in the civil war. While that conflict laid the groundwork for Assad's eventual fall, it took more than ten years of fighting, combined with punitive international sanctions and a major ground offensive by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, to bring about the regime's demise.

During the Iraq war in 2003, no high-level **defections**

(https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20030509_RL31339_ca468ebd14b070954f7e1849435fa929aeb7f8eb.pdf)

occurred, as many officials remained loyal or went into hiding. In fact, after the U.S.-led ground invasion toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, the coalition's de-Baathification process prompted officers to continue fighting by joining the growing insurgent movement. This explains why there has been **pushback**

(<https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-reza-pahlavi>) against implementing a similar process in a post-Islamic Republic Iran. Some analysts **believe** **(<https://kayhanlife.com/authors/opinion-irans-regular-army-should-side-with-the-people-rescue-the-nation/>)** that the Artesh, Iran's regular army, would more likely **side with the Iranian people** **(<https://news.az/news/-alexander-gur-arie-iranian-army-could-side-with-people-irgc-more-motivated-to-defend-regime-interview>)**, but that has yet to happen.

What Next?

In short, defections from a hardened ideological regime with its back against the wall require much more than magical thinking. Despite President Trump's promise of fair treatment for security personnel who defect, he has not explained why members of the clerical establishment would be better off defecting, which sends a discouraging signal.

Beyond that, there has been no real push to reinforce or amplify this message, particularly through the diaspora satellite news channels to which many Iranians remain glued. And neither the United States nor Israel has publicly offered incentives for defection such as financial rewards or international guarantees that high-ranking officials will not face trial.

Defections from an authoritarian regime can arguably be **facilitated**

(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/podcasts/how-strong-are-irans-strongmen>) best when there is safe passage to a specific country—something Washington has not offered. The CIA has **urged**

(<https://www.cnbc.com/2026/02/25/the-cia-urges-iranians-to-reach-out-as-informants-in-rare-move.html>)

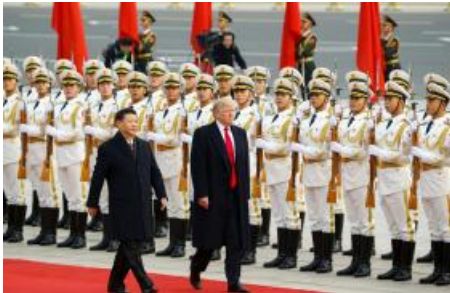
Iranians to reach out via social media to become informants, but given the state-imposed internet shutdown, this is not helpful. Meanwhile, former Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, who has offered himself as a transitional leader, began advertising a QR code on the website Iran International after the June 2025 war, giving Iranians an outlet to sign up as potential defectors. This January, however, he noted that more than **100,000 people**

(<https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/23/world/video/iran-united-states-airstrikes-lead-jake-tapper>) from the security apparatus and Iranian government ministries had signed up as defectors, but no officials from the U.S. government or elsewhere had offered to vet them (to the author's knowledge).

Ultimately, with the Islamic Republic still firmly in power at this juncture, it will be hard to initiate defections among senior officials unless they have a way to defect to another country. The issues surrounding defections remain largely unaddressed in foreign policy discourse on Iran but are central to any strategy aimed at degrading the clerical establishment. Absent such measures, the Iranian people may be left with a diminished regime that is even more **hardline** **(<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-radical-regime-change-a42d96ea>)** and repressive, and now hellbent on revenge—a future to which the Iranian people did not agree when they took to the streets just a few short months ago.

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